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Shultz Hints at Asylum for Guerrillas

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Secretary of State George P. Shultz yesterday gave strong public support to CIA-backed guerrillas fighting the government of Nicaragua and said that if they get into a jam, they may be able to obtain asylum in the United States.

Interviewed on "Meet the Press" (NBC, WRC), Shultz did not formally acknowledge that the anti-Sandinista "secret army" is receiving covert CIA aid, despite a statement by one of his questioners that this is "an open secret."

Nonetheless, Shultz gave unusually explicit backing to the guerrillas' cause, saying "their goal is one that, given our opinion of that [Sandinista] government, we can hardly turn away from."

Asked if U.S. forces would intervene to "save the skins" of the guerrillas in case they suffer military reverses, Shultz replied: "Well, if they seek to leave some place and want asylum or something like that, well, they may come here."

Shultz's statement was believed to

be the first by a senior U.S. official publicly suggesting the possibility that the CIA-backed forces, presently reported to number more than 10,000 and reportedly being built up by the CIA to 12,000 to 15,000, might be given asylum here if they fail to oust the Sandinista regime.

Until recently U.S. officials generally declined to comment about anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua, citing a standard practice of not discussing intelligence matters. Since the "secret army" became the subject of a lengthy debate in the House, which voted July 28 to ban further CIA aid to the insurgency, officials have begun to speak of the guerrillas more openly, though usually still in guarded terms.

Shultz said the administration has by no means accepted the House vote as "the final verdict" on the anti-government insurgency in Nicaragua, pointing out that the Senate has not acted to cut off U.S. support of the operation and that President Reagan has not signed such legislation into law.

While taking the House vote "very

seriously," Shultz said, "we're going to work hard" to see that Congress does not vote to terminate U.S. backing for the operation.

The secretary repeated the official U.S. position that the U.S. government is "not trying to" overthrow the leftist Sandinista government. A law passed last December and signed into law by Reagan forbids covert U.S. aid "for the purpose" of overthrowing that government. Shultz conceded in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last Thursday that it "certainly is" the aim of anti-Sandinista forces to overthrow the Managua government.

Asked if U.S. forces might come to the aid of the "secret army" if they get into trouble, Shultz said, "I do not foresee any armed U.S. attempt to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, absolutely none."

Shultz, asked about the incident at sea a week ago in which a U.S. naval vessel shadowed a Soviet freighter bound for Nicaragua, said it was "quite normal" to ask for identification of ship and cargo, as was done of the Soviet vessel.